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Object Based Research: A Q'ing Vest

Hilary Baker

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Hello, my name is Hilary Baker. I am beginning my second year of graduate school at the University of Rhode Island this fall but the project I'm going to talk to you about today was during my first semester. It was the very first class I attended and I was understandably nervous. When Blaire came to us with the idea to base a class research project around the TSA conference theme, Textiles and Politics, and all that it would entail, I have to say I felt a little sick. Blaire set out multiple textiles from the University of Rhode Island's Historic Textile and Costume Collection in another room for us to choose from. There were quite a few that I would have been interested in researching but then I saw this vest. At first I just thought, Oh that's pretty, but then I started really looking at it and noticing the intriguing things about it such as the blank areas on the front and back, the fringe and its color, as well as the beauty of the embroidery. Our assignment was to research our object in terms of the textile and it's relationship to the politics of the country and era. Our focus was not the material analysis of our objects so much as the objects socio-cultural positioning. A definition of "politics" was not predetermined as part of our instructions, rather it was left open to be interpreted by research findings. I will be discussing the findings of my research and the different avenues of discovery we, as a class, utilized.

Research Findings

The Manchu people conquered China in 1644 and founded the Ch'ing Dynasty. They brought their national costume with them and imposed it in place of the previous Chinese dynasty's traditional court and official costumes.¹ Manchu forces entered Peking without opposition; they had in fact been invited in to intervene in a rebellion led by Li Tzu-chêng that had brought the preceding Ming dynasty to ruin.² The Manchus conquered the whole nation, and ruled until 1912, when a revolutionary group overthrew them and created the first Republic of China.³ They named their dynasty Ch'ing (or Qing) meaning "pure."⁴ "The Manchus brought with them a structured military organization, which ensured the separation of conqueror and conquered, and a strong nomadic heritage, which differed significantly from the Chinese agrarian way of life."⁵ By developing a political organization sufficient to maintain their own identity as well as the Chinese style bureaucracy, they ensured the Chinese would not absorb their culture. The Manchus believed that requiring the Chinese to adopt their national costume would be an easy way to reduce tension between the two "races" because of the uniformity. During the 267-year Qing dynasty, Manchu cultural expressions, including language, custom, and costume, signaled ethnicity

¹ Schuyler Cammann, "Origins of the Court and Official Robes of the Ch'ing Dynasty," *Artibus Asiae* 12 (1949): 189.

² John E. Vollmer, *Decoding Dragons: Status Garments in Ch'ing Dynasty China* (Oregon: University of Oregon Museum of Art, 1983), 14.

³ Schuyler Cammann, "Costume in China, 1644 to 1912," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 75 (1979): 3.

⁴ John E. Vollmer, *In the Presence of the Dragon Throne: Ch'ing Dynasty Costume (1644-1911) in the Royal Ontario Museum* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1977), 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

and demonstrated political control.⁶ My research led me to conclude that URI's vest is a late nineteenth century *xiapei*, a sleeveless over garment or vest worn by Han Chinese women on formal occasions. The blank areas on the front and back are where the rank badges would have gone and these badges would publicize the rank status and position of the wearer, whether they were military or in civil service and how distinguished they were in their positions. The civil servants of the Q'ing dynasty were required to pass civil service examinations, a legacy that dates back to 2200 B.C. Once a man became a civil servant, he was eligible for promotion annually based on evaluations by his superiors. From princes down, all persons of rank wore robes with embroidered square patches. "For civil officials the patches were embroidered with birds, while for military officers they were embroidered with animals."⁷ The *buzi*—patches of embroidered symbols worn on the chest and back of gowns that indicated rank—was the most outstanding feature on the Chinese official uniform to mark the relationship of garment and power.⁸ Knowing this, I wondered if it would be possible to discover the position, whether military or civil, and rank status of the person who wore this vest.

Museum Collections

Part of our research was finding similar objects and comparing them to our own. A few students were lucky enough to have similar or related objects in URI's collection, which they used to help answer questions. After scouring books and not finding what I needed, I turned to other museum collections. I sent out emails to quite a few collection managers with a picture of URI's vest, asking if they knew of similar items in their collections. A few emailed me back to say "no", many more did not reply. The *xiapeis* I found for comparison were from museums that had searchable Internet collections and a past auction from Christies.

Library Research

In terms of research resources, most of our class utilized the University of Rhode Island's library, as well as a few faculties' personal libraries, to gather most of our information. Many sources I found helpful were difficult to obtain because they were not available through inter-library loan. As I was looking through the extensive library section on Chinese clothing, I realized the same people wrote a lot of the books. John Vollmer and Schuyler Cammann were names I saw repeatedly. Through the TSA website, I was able to track down John Vollmer's contact information.

Expert Contact

I emailed John Vollmer, attaching a picture of URI's *xiapei*, and asked whether or not my hope of discovering the rank status was possible. He was very nice when he wrote back and told me no. He said that the embroidery was an all-encompassing design, probably due to the fact that making a new vest for each promotion would have been too costly, therefore one vest was made and the rank squares were sewn on and taken off accordingly.⁹ I'd like to go ahead and thank John Vollmer for being so open and willing to help a new student. Through this, I've experienced the valuable resources available from experts in their field that are willing to help if you're willing to ask.

⁶ Vollmer, *Decoding Dragons*, 14.

⁷ Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming, *5,000 Years of Chinese Costumes*, (Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, Ltd., 1987), 182.

⁸ Mei, *Chinese Clothing*, 66.

⁹ John Vollmer, e-mail message to author, October 2011.

Advantages/Disadvantages

I know most of us were feeling a little overwhelmed with the structure of this class. The benefit of this type of research project was that while we, as students, were learning something new about our object, URI's Historic Textile and Costume Collection was also learning something new. Blaire picked objects that did not have a lot of known information, but which she felt we would be able to find ample information, to try to fill in that knowledge gap for the collection while teaching us how to research historical objects. Issues with finding enough supporting information were a common complaint and I know I had problems with getting a reply from some of the museum collections I contacted. Finding a well-known expert on the subject and being able to communicate with him, thanks to TSA and its resources, was a new and valuable experience for me.

Ongoing Considerations and Conclusion

Nearly a year later, I was visiting a friend's house in my hometown of Brenham, Texas, when her parents showed me items a relative brought back from China in the early 1900s. Among these items was this vest, a very similar style but with an interesting color palette.

We are still discovering information even though our class is over and it is difficult to ignore these discoveries without starting a whole new research project. Just like Mary Elizabeth's discovery about the recent popularity of the Russian cotton lining at antique fairs, the emergence of this vest brings up more questions that have been left unanswered due to time constraints. However, we feel we achieved the class objective by looking at these historical objects in a new light. By focusing on the political atmosphere surrounding our objects, we were able to uncover avenues of discovery that might have been otherwise overlooked. My research led me to examine the issues of conquest, gender, and social hierarchy, of which there is still more to learn.